

The Promotion of Metacognition Through Soft Skills

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DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITY

I teach a course in Metacognitive Strategies which focuses on the social and emotional components to academic success. These are referred to as ‘soft skills’ (emotional intelligence, interpersonal and intrapersonal awareness, emotional regulation, problem solving etc.) The course is presented to students who are members of the Regional Center at FDU who have been diagnosed with a language-based learning disability and or ADHD/ADD. Weekly journal reflections are completed based on a prompt that reflects a soft skill that is being addressed in the lecture. These journal entries serve as a means of enhancing metacognition and reflection of the material and focus on strategies of incorporating the skill into practice of academic performance.

An additional element involves a final project which requires the students to identify an individual they have admired for their successful accomplishment of some specific achievement. They are required to interview this individual and discover the soft skills associated with their accomplishment, not the ‘hard skills’ which are traditionally aligned with success (GPA, School Attended, Titles achieved etc.). Furthermore, the student specifically is asked to assess their own soft skill set, including areas that are strengths and those to develop, and implement a plan of incorporating these into their academic goals and pursuits. Further details of the activities, see the Appendix.

MOTIVATION AND CONTEXT FOR ACTIVITY

The class is designed to explore the ‘soft skills’, which include the social and emotional skills that are associated with academic success. The assignments are designed to provide tangible exercises that, when explored in a metacognitive manner and applied purposefully with a plan, can result in success and improve the academic and career course of an individual. The goal is improved self-regulation and critical thinking in regard to specific social and emotional skills that are highly correlated with academic success.

NUTS AND BOLTS

The specific intent of this course and its assigned exercises is to weave an academic experience with the content of metacognition and soft skills that are connected to academic and career success. Specific topics addressed include emotional intelligence, personal responsibility, grit, self-motivation, interdependence, active listening, self-awareness, life-long learning, motivation, growth mindset, and goal setting. Students participate in discussion, reflection exercises, and the final project requiring them to take the knowledge of soft skills presented in class, think critically and analyze these topics, and implement them by carrying out an interview and create a presentation. The final project of interview and

presentation is a culmination of analyzing a ‘story of success’ that from a distance may have looked easily attained for the interviewee. The task is for the student to discover through inquiry about soft skills, how in fact these played a critical role in the successful outcome for the interviewee. The students acquire insight into the ‘reality’ of the achievement, reflect on the soft skills they have developed and ones that they would benefit from developing further. A key feature is working on the plans of implementation which demonstrates improved critical thinking and capacity for self-regulation of good decision making and goal attainment.

The result is metacognitive ‘boot camp’ in regard to the less frequented content in the classroom that are key to academic effectiveness. Metacognition has been associated with improved critical thinking skills (Magno, 2010). Students are given knowledge about soft skills, asked to discuss through oral and written means of reflection, and then take it a step further and asked to apply the concepts to their own academic tasks throughout the semester. This sequence of knowledge acquisition, analysis, and application are the nuts and bolts of weaving the material together.

ACTIVITY OUTCOMES

The highly interactive nature of the course forces the contemplation necessary for students to adopt a more metacognitive approach to learning and their goals beyond the classroom. Critical thinking and self-regulation related to the connection between soft skill development and their academic and learning capacity is improved. As a counselor within the program that serves the students, I meet with each student individually one time per week during their freshmen year. I have observed that students begin to synthesize the course material with their academic functioning and improve their approach to matters related to their courses, studying, and academic goals. Many students begin to consider options to their approach in regard to their broader education and learning environment.

The culminating final project results in enhanced awareness of the interdependent nature of soft skills and hard skills for overall success in learning and career effectiveness. Presentations have been extraordinarily diverse with students choosing political figures, doctors, artists, students, business people, professors, peers, parents, coaches etc. Each year the series of presentations showcases the synthesis of soft skills and how growing awareness and purposeful use of these optimizes success academically as well as in career endeavors. Students demonstrate through their writing and oral reflection of their own use of soft skills, goals of further developing targeted soft skills during college to assist them in achieving academic success as well as future career success.

LESSONS LEARNED AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The literature is clear in support of the importance of soft skills both in the classroom and in life. While some time during the course is spent connecting the material to career endeavors, future directions might include more of this element. In addition, it would be worthy to have a ‘maintenance program’ that extends beyond the time of the course, so that as the freshmen students progress, they are provided with opportunities to review and integrate the soft skill concepts throughout their remaining years of their college experience. As a higher order thinking strategy, metacognition offers the opportunity to enhance and tap into the potential of the brain power within each student. Greater flexibility and awareness in thinking is the outcome and the continued goal of this form of application of metacognition.

REFERENCE

Magno, C. (2010). The role of metacognitive skills in developing critical thinking. *Metacognition Learning*, 5, 137-156. doi:10.1007/s11409-010-9054-4

APPENDIX**Metacognitive Activity Descriptions Mary Hebert (Fairleigh Dickinson University)**

The following are **samples of journal reflections** the students complete following more traditional lecture and class discussion of the topics. The intent of the journal reflections is to provide a metacognitive exercise on specific soft skill sets that students can incorporate into their academic goals and pursuits. Greater awareness lends itself to greater cognitive flexibility in self-- assessment and application.

1. Complete the 'self – assessment' on pages 6--9 in the textbook. This self--assessment is designed to help you determine your strengths or challenges in 8 different non--academic skills areas, including accepting responsibility, discovering self--motivation, mastering self-- management, employing interdependence, gaining self--awareness, adopting lifelong learning, developing emotional intelligence, and believing in yourself.
 2. Write about an academic--related experience when you experienced happiness, joy, anxiety, frustration etc...(e.g., receiving a disappointing grade, losing your textbook, lack of interest in an assignment, having a positive interaction with a professor) How did you handle it? How do you evaluate how you handled it now looking back on the situation? What have you learned about your ability to recognize or regulate your emotions from the experience?
 3. Think of something you need to do, something you want to learn, or a problem you have to confront in your academic life. What is it? Now make a concrete plan. When will you follow through on your plan? Where will you do it? How will you do it? Think about it in vivid detail. (Please see page 228 on Mindset.) Make a concrete plan, and visualize it. Think of what, how, when, and where to optimize the change of your follow through and chances of success.
 4. What motivates you? What wisdoms have you acquired from the last semester about motivation? (e.g. Which classes tended to motivate you the most/least and why? What do you think you need to do the same and or differently to maintain the motivation to pursue your education? What advice would you give an incoming freshman about staying motivated in college?)
 5. How do you think you can use the growth mindset (see text and mindset information attached to the syllabus) to gain self--awareness and limit the impact of limiting core beliefs? How do we make conscious those thoughts (the self--talk) that sometimes impacts our choices? Identify one of these limiting beliefs that may affect your academic life, and how you might address it using the growth mindset.
 6. Reflect on how you have reevaluated your perception of success since the start of the course. Using the topics of the course over the course of the semester, what do you think are the elements of success, the roadmap to getting there? What have you become aware of since the start of this course in regard to your strengths and challenges to be academically successful?
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Course Text: Downing, Skip. (2014). *On Course*. Boston, Ma: Cengage.

The final exam project is a culmination of a series of steps to prepare for the final paper and power point/oral presentation required. The project includes steps which include:

1. Selecting an individual whom the student has admired for an achievement or perceives as successful in their work, life, talent etc. Ask this individual if they can interview them.
 2. Develop a series of questions based on the soft skill material learned about in class which will help the student discover what soft skills went into acquiring the observed success of their interviewee.
 3. Conduct the interview
 4. Write a paper identifying what they discovered about the soft skills that went into their interviewee's success. They are asked to include what they learned about the elements of success as it is related to soft skills, how it has inspired and impacted their own journey toward success, consider how it has made them think differently about achieving success and persisting towards goals.
 5. Create a PowerPoint presentation to present to the class what they found throughout the interview and evaluation of the soft skills that were used to achieve success for the person interviewed. The focus is on how the soft skills interfaced with the academic and career track for the individual.
 6. The student is to incorporate into the paper and the PowerPoint presentation how they have grown in their self-awareness of their own soft skill set. They are to identify those areas of strength, and those areas they need to develop further. The paper and presentation includes the metacognitive reflection of their personal development of soft skill sets and implementation into their academic goals and pursuits. Specific examples are to be provided with goals in regard to changes and improvements for their academic accomplishments.
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